

Takoma Park's 'Angry' Mayor Remembered

Memorial Held For Sammie Abbott

1/6/91

By Retha Hill
Washington Post Staff Writer

Even in the last days of his life, Sammie Abbott could not stop being angry.

Abbott, the feisty former mayor of Takoma Park, the organizer for social justice and peace, predicted at his sickbed that the American people would stop any war with Iraq, family members recalled yesterday.

"He said the American people would never forget the lessons of the Vietnam War, and [that] the protest movement would swell" against war in the Persian Gulf, said one of Abbott's daughters, Nancy Abbott Young, who attended the memorial service at the Washington Ethical Society in Northwest Washington.

She was one of about 400 family members and friends who attended the service for Abbott, who died Dec. 15 at the age of 82.

At various times, Abbott had stood in front of bulldozers to stop construction of a freeway he feared would destroy neighborhoods, rallied the people of Takoma Park to declare the city a nuclear-free zone, protested apartheid in front of the South African Embassy and fought for rent control during a period of soaring rents.

By his own count, Abbott was arrested 40 times, one time hurling his body against the back of a police wagon to force District police to take him to jail along with other protesters.

"Most of us don't have that kind of dedication. Most of us are seeking the comfort of a job, a title or a position," said Reginald H. Booker, who along with Abbott organized a committee of organizations that opposed freeways and pushed for mass transportation. "Sam was not seeking that. He didn't have a hidden agenda like so many other politicians."

Abbott also was a man who cried all night because his cat died, slept on the floor to be near his newborn grandson, had a secret passion for the soap opera "The Guiding Light," and was fiercely protective of his family, friends recalled.

Abbott's daughter Susan Abbott Arisman recalled that when she was



PHOTOS BY MARGARET THOMAS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Sammie Abbott's widow, Ruth, consoles daughter Susan during memorial service.

a child, other youngsters in her neighborhood would not play with the Abbott children because her parents were "communists," and that men in dark suits would follow her mother to the grocery store.

Yet "instead of self-pity and bitterness, my father gave us a sense of service," Arisman said.

The grandson of Arab Christian immigrants who fled Turkish persecution in Syria, Abbott grew up in Ithaca, N.Y., where he developed a passion for reading and art. During the Great Depression, he left Cornell University to organize farmers and the unemployed.

In 1940, Abbott moved to Washington and continued his union organizing work before joining the Air Force during World War II, where he worked in intelligence. After the war, he organized petition drives against the atomic bomb and was active in the presidential candidacy of Henry Wallace. For his activities, Abbott was branded a communist (he considered himself a Marxist) and was hauled before congressional committees investigating radicals.

In 1978, he lost his bid to become Takoma Park mayor by eight votes, but won the post two years later and held it for three terms, pushing



Booklets commemorating Abbott's life were handed out at the service.

an agenda including environmental awareness, rent control and peace that led to the city's becoming known as "the Berkeley of the East."

Once, in an effort to explain what made him tick, Abbott told a reporter. "I'm a perpetually mad person. I hate injustice. As far as I'm concerned, I'm living to fight injustice. I'm living to fight the goddamned thing. I'm too mad to sleep."